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New KGB chief makes show of toughness

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Moscow—It wasn't very long after Vitaly Vasilevich Fedorchuk arrived from the Ukraine last May to take over as head of the Soviet KGB that the rumors started about the new atmosphere down on Dzerzhinksy square, site of an ornate former insurance company building that is now KGB headquarters.

One story was that Mr. Fedorchuk was appalled to see so many of his operatives wearing jeans—especially American jeans—and banned the symbols of American culture from the building.

The KGB is a military outfit and, according to a followup rumor, Colonel-General Fedorchuk not only wanted to see his officers in uniform but also wanted to make sure they had field, every-day and dress uniforms at home in the closet.

Furthermore, a third rumor said, the new chief believed too many people were acting like ordinary Soviet bureaucrats—taking too many tea breaks and too many days off. The enemies of the people weren't taking days off, he is reported to have said, so neither should the forces hunting them down.

It was all so much rumor and conjecture but it perfectly matched the face in the one widely circulated photograph of the new man at the KGB—hard-eyed and beefy, a visage befitting a man who made his reputation hectoring dissidents in the Ukrainian S.S.R., where the secret police have a well-won reputation for brutality.

It also sent a collective shudder through Moscow's dissidents, freethinkers and unorthodox intellectuals that a distinct tightening of the atmosphere was about to begin. Many now say that the six months that have intervened since Mr. Fedorchuk's appointment has not altered that initial judgment one bit.

"The mood has tightened in a way you can feel," a dissident writer said not long ago. "People who have always believed they were safe because they may have had someone looking out for them don't feel so safe anymore."

The Soviet dissident movement for the most part already had been crushed by Mr. Fedorchuk's predecessor, Yuri V. Andropov, who, despite accumulated evidence to the contrary, acquired the reputations of being a moderate and the thinking man's secret policeman.

This is probably due not to the facts but to his background (he is a diplomat), appearance (tall, donnish and slightly preoccupied) and friends, who in their frequent contacts with Western correspodents and scholars sell their man as a moderate and an intellectual.

Mr. Andropov headed the KGB for 15 years. During the last nine of them, he has been a member of the ruling 14-man Politburo and among the inner circle of Kremlin leaders. Now, he is considered one of two leading candidates to succeed Leonid I. Brezhnev as party leader.

Mr. Fedorchuk spent most of his career in the Ukraine, first rooting out nationalists and then rooting out dissidents. Before his appointment as KGB chief in Moscow, he was not known to have any clout in Moscow outside Dzerzhinsky square. He was not—and still is not—a member of the 319-member Communist Party Central Committee or at least has not yet been publicly identified as one.

Still, he is credited or blamed for a number of changes in the past few months that would leave little doubt that he wasted no time in making his mark.

"It's clear now that since Fedorchuk, [the KGB] has become much tougher and much more cruel," said one Soviet dissident.

Last summer, the Kremlin cut direct-dial phone links with Western Europe and North America in a move widely interpreted as an effort to tighten control over the population.

Previously, foreigners had been able to pick up the phone and call ordinary Soviets, and ordinary Soviets had, with slightly less ease, been able to pick up the phone and dial the outside world. Now, all calls must be made through a switchboard, an arrangement which for nonofficial Soviet citizens means delays that can last for days.

The move is said to have embarrassed agencies like the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Trade that regularly deal with the outside world and that want the Soviet Union to be taken seriously as a nation for something more than just its military might. Or, at least, this is what people from these agencies have been telling outraged Western diplomats and businessmen.

Publicly, authorities say the abolition of direct dial to the outside world is due to equipment maintenance requirements. That is an explanation that almost no one believes in view of some other recent steps to isolate Soviets from foreign influence.

For example, nonofficial Soviet citizens—and that does not mean just dissidents—normally have been allowed to enter foreign embassies for social events as long as they presented written invitations to the policemen whose job it is to shoo away citizens taking too great an interest in an embassy or a foreigner.

Now, there are more and more frequent reports of people being turned away—with or without invitations—unless their names appear on a list approved by the authorities.

This occurred at the Fourth of July reception at the U.S. ambassador's home until a complaint was made. Since then other Western diplomats have reported that Soviet guards have attempted to check the documents of citizens even when they are being accompanied by a diplomat.

Embassies and other buildings where foreigners work or live are normally guarded round the clock by men dressed in uniforms of the civilian police but presumed to be KGB officers.

Traditionally, residents of the Estonian S.S.R. on the Baltic coast have been less isolated from the rest of the world because of their ability to pick up television and radio broadcasts from Finland.

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Now even that may be changing. According to Finnish newspaper reports, the converters needed to enable a Soviet TV set to pick up Finnish programs have been removed from television sets in public places in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

There have been even more curious moves to limit the exchange of books and printed matter. While the practice of restricting printed matter coming into the country dates almost to the day the Soviet Union was established in 1917, the new moves for the first time restrict what can be sent out.

Soviets who want to send printed materials abroad are being told they must have written approval from the Ministry of Culture. Again, Soviet scientists and academics who valued their contacts with the outside world were said to have been outraged but, again, were not consulted beforehand.

Moscow dissidents who have come into contact with the KGB since Mr. Fedorchuk arrived say that a normal part of the threat they receive is to stop seeing foreign correspondents or foreign visitors.

Alexander Lerner, who for 11 years has been perhaps the leading figure in the campaign by Soviet Jews for the right to emigrate, is one who has taken the threats seriously. Professor Lerner has told friends that at the age of 69 he is in no mood to sample the kind of experiences the KGB might have to offer.

One of Mr. Fedorchuk's earliest victories was the formal dissolution of the dissident committee that monitored Soviet compliance with the human rights treaties it has signed. That came after one of the three members, 75-year-old Sofia Kallistratova, was told she could face criminal charges and a spell in a Siberian forced-labor camp.

Strongarm methods also seem to be making a comeback. The wife of a man arrested last summer was beaten in broad daylight after she had met with foreign correspondents to discuss her husband's arrest.

Similar techniques were used against members of the fledgling unofficial peace movement last spring. The group's founder, 25-year-old Sergei Batorvrin, was kept under house arrest for nearly a month before being forcibly committed to a psychiatric hospital.

All this occurred virtually on the eve of the arrival in Moscow of a group of Scandinavian peace people. It was an embarrassment not only to the Scandinavians, who appeared naive and manipulated, but to the Soviet peace propaganda machine.

The frequency of searches of apartments and dachas of independent intellectuals and writers also has increased. If the searchers find what they believe to be "subversive" literature, the possessor is questioned in an effort to find the identity of the person who gave it to him; that person is in turn searched and questioned.

"Now, it is no longer just for people who distribute such books," a writer said. "Now, it is enough just to possess one of those books. That's something we haven't seen since Stalin's time."

Trying to fathom the reasons why all this is happening—or to decide really whether anything out of the ordinary is happening at all—has become a major preoccupation of dissidents and foreigners in Moscow.

There are several theories:

- The hardening policy reflects the personality of the new boss, who is simply applying Ukrainian methods to the Soviet Union as a whole.
- Mr. Andropov is still running the KGB, but in order to preserve his treasured image as a moderate, he is having Mr. Fedorchuk do the nasty work.
- The chill is a result of the natural functioning of the bureaucracy at a time when there is going to be a transition of power in the Kremlin. With a time of uncertainty on the horizon, the KGB is simply trying to make sure the lid is on tight at home.
- There hasn't really been any significant change, but one is perceived simply because Mr. Fedorchuk is Ukrainian and looks like a hard case.

In fact, little is known about his opinions on most matters.

Much of his reputation is based on an article he wrote last year for a local ideological journal. It does not show great sophistication in analyzing the problems of a modern socialist state, blaming most things on the CIA and foreign radio broadcasts.

He even manages to shift some of the blame for the Polish crisis to China—evidence he was blissfully unaware of the thaw in Sino-Soviet relations that the Kremlin was even then attempting to start.

He also attacks the "consumerist approach to life," which he says imperialist agents are trying to instill among the Soviet masses. This is a hint that he may consider complaints about food shortages and the lack of consumer goods in Soviet shops a sign of disloyalty.